
THOMAS HIGGS: THE BUILDER AND HIS HOUSE

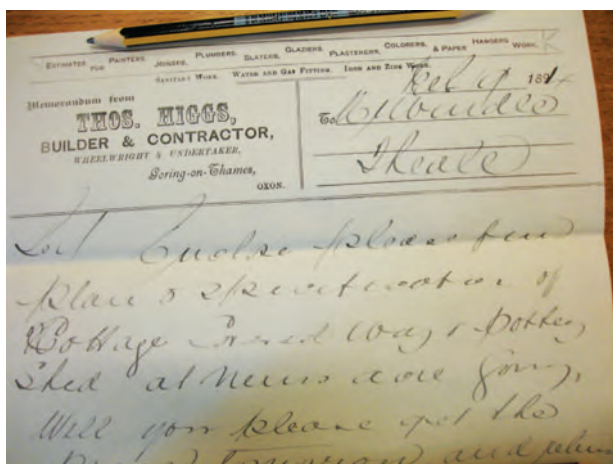
In 1774 John Toby from Goring died leaving his son-in-law Thomas Higgs in South Stoke, £20 for his granddaughter, Mary Higgs's education and a further £1000 when she was 18. John Toby also left £3 for bread to feed the poor in Goring and is buried within the chancel floor of St Thomas' Church.

The Higgs were a long established family in South Stoke. There is an extensive framed family tree on the wall of the bell tower in the parish church. A particularly illustrious ancestor was Griffith Higgs who was born in the village in 1589 and became chaplain to Elizabeth of Bohemia and later Dean of Lichfield. Loyalty to King Charles I meant he was deprived of his livings and came home to South Stoke in 1647, living there until his death in 1659. He was a considerable benefactor to the village and there is a bust to his memory in the church.

Two centuries later a member of this family, William Higgs, was a master carpenter. He came to Goring at some time between 1841 and 1851, probably after his marriage to Mary Froome in 1846. Their first child William, who did not survive infancy, is recorded in the Goring parish register as being born in November 1847. By the time of the 1861

census he was described as a builder and carpenter employing seven men. At that time his sons Thomas and Joseph were 9 and 7 respectively. William died on 19 December 1865 and his widow, Mary, took over the business. When she was granted probate, William's effects were worth less than £200.

By 1881 their son Thomas had taken on the concern and was now described as the builder with his brother Joseph as his 'clerk'. Joseph never married and continued to work for his brother as what would be called today the office manager. In the 1887 edition of Kelly's trade directory, Thomas is described as a builder, house decorator, undertaker and wheelwright. He became very successful and by 1903 he was a 'builder and contractor'; he built houses in the village both large and small and owned many of them, so one can assume he must have made a good income from rents as well. By 1910 he was the owner of 24 Goring properties.



Thomas Higgs's letterhead, 1894 [Oxfordshire History Centre]

The Higgs's house

Towards the end of the 19c, Thomas Higgs bought a property at the western end of what is now Station Road, Goring. He seems to have lived in the house on the plot since coming to the village, presumably renting it from Charles Gardiner, the owner of much land in the village.

A building is recorded on the 1787 Enclosure map on the site of what is now Sprimont House/Beams End and there is more detail on the Tithe map of 1846 where Plot No. 314 shows a small cottage. Manor Road did not exist at that time and the cottage is shown adjacent to the Nuns' orchard.

The cottage is also marked on the Ordnance Survey map of 1877 as well as the Nuns' orchard but now the 'Artist House' is named and also the School for Boys and Girls which is now the Community Centre. Goring Farm is also clearly marked as is Ferry House which is shown as Ivy Cottage, and the Queens Arms (now Tesco) is named. However



1846 Tithe map of Goring [GGLHS]

the Catherine Wheel and John Barleycorn are not identified probably because they were ale houses (beer brewed on the premises by the owner) and did not have residential accommodation which was a requirement to be shown on the map as public houses at that time.

The map of 1877 clearly shows an extended cottage with outbuildings. The map also shows three adjoining cottages on the opposite corner which were later to become known as the John Barleycorn.

*1877 6 inch to the mile OS map,
Goring [National Library of Scotland]*



Between 18 November 1885 and 12 March 1898, Thomas Higgs was asked to agree to a number of covenants on the sale of the cottage and adjacent land by the vendor, Charles Lawrence Weare Gardiner. Charles Gardiner (born 1849) was the Squire of Goring who had inherited almost 2,000 acres from his father who had bought the land from John Nicholls in 1819 soon after the second Goring Enclosure Act of 1812. Charles gradually sold off the land for building and also donated monies to build the Old Vicarage before becoming an Arctic explorer with Captain Carlson. He died in Devon in 1925 still known

as the Squire of Goring.

The covenants applying to Thomas Higgs's purchase are to be found in many sale documents relating to former Gardiner land in Goring, but the builder was successful in having the covenant removed that required the land not be used for the purpose of a school or for the care of lunatics or persons of an unsound mind. Perhaps having persuaded Charles Gardiner that he wanted to extend the cottage only as his family home, finally in 1898, he was just restricted to not using the house for the sale of any wine, beer, ale, spirits or any other intoxicating liquors.

Thus in 1898 Thomas Higgs, having bought the cottage, extended it into his home and offices overlooking his builder's yard, which was on the opposite side of the road. This became Betwins Garage and is now Bellême Mews.



Building plans for the extension left, ground floor, right, first floor [Alan Brookes]

He added more bedrooms, a kitchen, scullery and pantry rooms and WC at ground level. He also included a large bathroom with separate WC on the first floor, which was still there until 2005 when it was converted by the present owner into two bathrooms.

The 1899 OS map shows the Higgs house now sited on the corner of Station Road and the recently developed Manor Road. The Catherine Wheel is shown with a smithy. A toll house is still located on the Streatley side of the river bridge. The end to Ferry Lane shows the Roman ford where Roman pottery had been found.

Sprimont House today: old cottage on the left and the Victorian extension on the right [Alan Brookes]



The 1910 Inland Revenue Valuation Survey describes the house as having eight bedrooms. The outside buildings, now 'the stables' are shown for storage, stabling for two horses, harness room, fowl house and manure pit. The full site value is shown as £865 with a gross market value of £1,695.

Index Letter	Description of Building	Dimensions			Cubical Contents	Condition	Remarks
		Frontage	Depth	Height			
A	Small tiled stove in floor of room				good		
B	Shedding for stables & coal house				good		
C	Small house wood & D roof				poor		
E	Manure Pit & C. Coal house above				good		
F	Single wheel head tiled				good		
G	Manure house wood tiled				poor		

Left: Higgs's house and outbuildings, Inland Revenue Valuation Survey 1910 field book [TNA]

Below: Higgs's yard, Station Road, Inland Revenue Valuation Survey 1910 field book [TNA]

Index Letter	Description of Building	Dimensions			Cubical Contents	Condition	Remarks
		Frontage	Depth	Height			
<i>Manure Yard</i>							
A	The also tiled stove head for C. & F. to				good		
B	Shedding for stables & coal house				good		
C	The house wood & D roof				poor		
D	Shedding for stables & coal house				good		
E	The tiled building a head for stables				workable for		
F	Shedding for stables & coal house				good		
G	Shedding for stables & coal house				good		
H	Manure house wood tiled				poor		
I	Manure house wood tiled				poor		
J	The also tiled stove head for C. & F. to				good		
K	Shedding for stables & coal house				poor		

Thomas Higgs's house is clearly shown on the 1912 map. Manor Road has now been further developed and 'Crossways' (plot 833) built on what was the Nuns' orchard. The John Barleycorn site is still shown as three cottages.

A booming business

Thus Goring was expanding rapidly and Thomas Higgs must have been very successful with two horses in his stable and an office overlooking his workshop. He was building many houses in Goring and public buildings like the Village Hall. He died on 5 December 1918 at the age of 67 possibly due to the 'flu pandemic that year. He left £28,406 in his will (equivalent to £602,000 in 2005 according to the National Archives currency converter) so he would have been a millionaire today.

William Higgs continued his father's business and lived in the same house. Les Novell, born 1925, at 14 worked for William Higgs. He helped Higgs to build the World War II pill box at Gatehampton Farm.

Other memories come via Brian Joslyn whose father Laurence Hugh Joslyn worked for Higgs & Sons as a carpenter and joiner 1930-1950 in the workshop on Station Road. His work included making coffins and Brian remembers his father's story that they used to have to phone Goring Mill to ask them to provide more electricity to drive the saw bench to cut large sections of wood. Mr Mason and Mr Gutteridge (both now deceased) also worked as carpenters in the workshop at that time.

Sprimont House / Beams End

William Higgs died in 'The House' on 3 January 1963. His sister Maud continued to live there until Stokes Development (Percival Slade & Francis Fullbrook) bought 1 Station Road for £3,000.

In December 1963, plans were drawn up by RO Birch, Chartered Quantity Surveyors from Reading to divide the Higgs house into two homes by building a new nine inch brick party wall on the line of the old main chimney, with a new concrete party floor over the existing ground floor WC. The corridor at first floor, which linked the Higgs's bedrooms, was blocked off and the wall between what had been a sitting and dining room was removed to form the main living room in what became Beams End.

In 1964 Dorothy Vere Tillard bought the larger of the now two houses from Stokes Development & Investment Company for the sum of £6,750. Born 6 August 1905, she died in Thames Bank nursing home, Goring on 16 March 1976 and is buried with her husband (killed in action with the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm on 6 July 1941 aged 34) at St Mary's Church, Denham, Buckinghamshire. Sprimont House is so named because she had previously lived at 6 Sprimont Place, London SW3.

Also in 1964 the smaller of the two houses was bought by Lt Col. Eric and Mrs Marian Prattley, previously living at 4 Wolverley House, Goring on Thames, and is shown on the deeds as Beam-Ends, not Beams End as it is now known.

In 1983 Mr and Mrs Wain Heapy bought Sprimont House for £12,700 which shows how house prices have increased dramatically in recent years. Sprimont House is currently owned by Professor and Mrs A Brookes and Beams End by Mrs J Turner.

The building

For those interested in the construction of the two houses over time, the original cottage with its central fireplace can be identified by the wooden pegs fixing the outside timbers facing on to Station Road.

Wooden pegs fixing the timbers on wall facing onto Station Road [Alan Brookes]

The oak beams to the original cottage are still there in the dining room to Sprimont House and in the dining half of the room of Beams End. The original stud wall



which would have formed the outside wall of the original cottage is evidenced by the holes in the last beam which would have received the vertical timbers for the stud wall. One of the original cast nails fixing the outside wall can now be seen on an inside wall of one bedroom in Beams End. During conversion of the kitchen at Sprimont House in the area which became the office in the Higgs plan, two bakers' ovens were found on the outside wall below what is now a circular window to the kitchen area. These were probably part of the original cottage which possibly in the 18c was a bakehouse.



Beams in Sprimont House which would have supported the roof to the original cottage [Alan Brookes]

Other interesting features from the Victorian part of Sprimont House are the tiles depicting wild animals on the front of the two fireplaces in the bedrooms; and roof beams supporting the roof to the original cottage which has been hewed, not cut, on one side only. The shape of the old beam can be clearly seen.



Tiles in a bedroom fireplace [Alan Brookes]

Sadly, the last apple tree of what was once the Nuns' orchard died last year of old age and had to be cut down.

Alan J Brookes & Janet Hurst

Sources

Census returns, Goring parish registers, National Probate Calendar [www.Ancestry.co.uk]

Goring Enclosure map 1787, Goring tithe map 1846 [GGLHS archives]

Goring RDC building plans [Oxfordshire History Centre]

Inland Revenue Valuation Survey 1910 map and field book for Goring [TNA]

Kelly's Directories

Title deeds [AJ Brookes; C Stoneham]

Victoria County History: South Stoke [www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol7/pp93-112]

Will: John Toby 1674 [www.Findmypast.co.uk]